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Editorial

Political Behavior in the EU Multi-Level System

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Abstract

Together with its further widening and deepening, the character of the EU has changed fundamentally during the last two decades. Acknowledging this development, the politics-dimension has become visibly more relevant in research on the EU. This “politics turn” is accompanied by an increased interest in research on political behavior of individual and collective actors—voters, parties, interest groups, executive agencies, mass and social media—in the EU multi-level system. The objectives of this thematic issue are to conceptually, empirically, and methodologically capture the different facets of this newly emerged interest in actors’ political behavior in the EU multi-level system. To this end, the thematic issue strives to highlight the connections between political processes and behavior at the European level and other political layers in the EU Member States’ multi-level systems. In particular, we aim to broaden the scope of research on political behavior in the EU and its strong focus on electoral politics across multiple levels of government. To this end, the thematic issue links research on voting behavior with work on party competition, electoral campaigns, public opinion, protest politics, responsiveness, (interest group) representation, government and opposition dynamics, and parliamentary behavior more broadly to the multi-layered systems within EU Member States.

Keywords

European elections; European Union; multi-level system; parties; political behavior; politics; voters

Issue

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of its further widening and deepening, the character of the EU has changed fundamentally during the last two decades: “The EU, long characterized as a system of multilevel governance, is moving to a system of multilevel and perhaps transnational politics” (Laffan, 2016, p. 922). Whereas much of the research in EU politics in the past decades has focused on its ‘institutional development’ (Dinan, 2010; Leuffen, Rittberger, & Schimmelfennig, 2013; Pinder, 2004), ‘policymaking’ and policy dynamics in the EU (Richardson, 2012; Wallace, Pollack, & Young, 2014), or the EU’s ‘political system’ as such (Hix & Høyland, 2011), attention has recently shifted towards the ‘politics’ of the EU (Cini & Borragán, 2013; Lelieveldt & Princen, 2014; Magone,

2015). Acknowledging this overall development, it is uncontested that the politics-dimension has become visibly more relevant within the research field of EU studies (see Figure 1).

As a matter of course, the mounting relevance of the politics-dimension in research on the EU reflects the heightened interconnectedness of policymaking arenas in the EU’s multi-level system. The evolution of the nomination procedure of the president of the European Commission in the context of the past European Parliament (EP) elections can be cited as an illustration of the interconnection of political actors and their behavior across the EU’s multi-level system. With the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidate) system in 2014, the predominantly national election campaigns were infused with a crucial suprana-

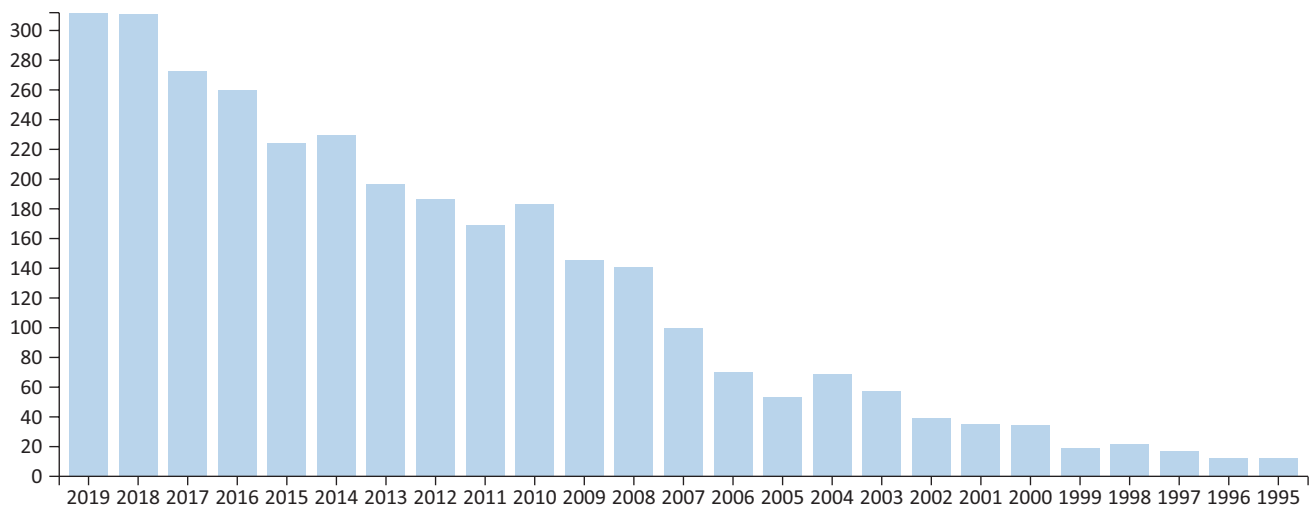


Figure 1. Total number of published articles per year with the topic ‘EU politics’ in academic journals covered in the Social Sciences Citation Index (1995–2019). Source: authors’ calculation.

tional component: The nomination of lead candidates by transnational party groups was poised to become a precondition for the Commission presidency—at least theoretically (see Braun & Popa, 2018; Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). Alongside a strengthening of the supranational component in the past EP elections, the regional dimension became more focal as well: Since the German *Spitzenkandidat* of the European People’s Party (EPP) for the 2019 EP elections, Manfred Weber, is a member of the Christian Social Union (CSU), a party that only campaigns in Bavaria, his election campaign also showed a strong regional component since his campaign was mostly visible in Bavaria and to a much lesser extent in other German states and European countries, respectively. Finally, none of the *Spitzenkandidaten* became Commission President because of partisan conflict among the party groups in the EP on the one hand, and because the national leaders in the European Council were also unable to muster agreement on any of the lead candidates. This example demonstrates how EU politics is shaped by ‘subnational,’ ‘national,’ ‘supranational’ and ‘intergovernmental’ decisions as well as the interconnection between each of these levels. Against this background, the objectives of this thematic issue are to conceptually, empirically, and methodologically capture the different facets of this newly emerged interest in actors’ political behavior in the EU multi-level system. Moreover, the thematic issue brings together different traditions and schools of thought in political science (i.e., international relations as well as comparative politics and political sociology) which deal with EU politics although referring to different conceptual backgrounds.

2. A Brief Overview on the Study of Political Behavior in the EU Multi-Level System

Before we provide a brief overview on the study of political behavior in the EU multi-level system, we define

the two main conceptual anchors of our thematic issue. According to the *Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, political behavior refers to “the attitudes and behavior of publics, and the citizens’ role within the political process” (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007, p. 3). The *Handbook on Multi-level Governance* defines ‘multi-level governance’ as “a set of general-purpose or functional jurisdictions that enjoy some degree of autonomy within a common governance arrangement and whose actors claim to engage in an enduring interaction in pursuit of common good” (Enderlein, Wälti, & Zürn, 2010, p. 4). The study of political behavior in the EU multi-level system therefore highlights the attitudes and behavior that publics and citizens bring to bear on political processes characterized by the interconnection of different layers of governance.

What do we know from previous research in this broad field of political behavior in the EU multi-level system? Over the course of the past decades, research on political behavior in general, and on its various subdomains in particular, has gradually ventured into EU studies. For instance, public opinion research with its focus on political attitudes and electoral behavior in the United States and individual European countries (e.g., van Deth, Montero, & Westholm, 2007) has become an area of vibrant scholarship with a strong EU-angle. As EU integration accelerated in the 1990s, the famous permissive consensus (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993, 2007) is being challenged by a constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2008), which has made EU politics and policies increasingly salient in the domestic arena. Initially, this research on political attitudes and electoral behavior exclusively focused on the European level and did not adopt a multi-level perspective. This changed in the past two decades with several strands of literature contributing to the emergence of the research field of political behavior with an explicit EU multi-level system perspective. Picking up the multi-level perspective of the second-order election model (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), empirical studies of EP elec-

tions analyzed voting behavior in EP elections compared to voters' choices in national elections (see e.g., Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010; Schmitt & Teperoglou, 2017). In addition, scholars became more and more interested in the relationship between public opinion in EU Member States and its consequences for EU politics (see de Vries, 2018; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Moreover, scholars increasingly analyze multi-level party politics in the EU between the national and the European level (see e.g., Mühlböck, 2012; Wonka & Rittberger, 2014), as well as between the European and the regional level (see e.g., Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012; Gross & Debus, 2018). Furthermore, particularly the interest group literature scrutinizes country-based interest groups and their multi-level strategies towards the EU (see Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Braun, 2017; Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015; Eising, 2004; Klüver, Braun, & Beyers, 2015).

3. Locating This Thematic Issue in the Debate

As laid out in this introduction, this 'politics turn' is accompanied by an increased interest in research on political behavior of individual and collective actors in the EU multi-level system. The various contributions in this thematic issue link research on party organization (Pittoors, 2020), electoral behavior (Braun & Tausendpfund, 2020; Schmitt, Sanz, Braun, & Teperoglou, 2020), interest groups (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Statch, 2020), party competition (Lefkofridi, 2020), responsiveness (Lefkofridi & Giger, 2020) as well as government politics and parliamentary behavior (Euchner & Frech, 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild, Kriegmair, & Rittberger, 2020) more broadly to the multi-layered systems within EU Member States, but also between EU Member States (Koß & Séville, 2020). Although the "European polity is a complex multi-level institutional configuration, which cannot be adequately represented by theoretical models that are generally used in international relations or comparative politics" (Scharpf, 2010, p. 75), the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical insights gained in this thematic issue shed light on various aspects of political behavior in the EU multi-level system beyond the predominant focus on electoral politics across multiple levels of government (see, e.g., Golder, Lago, Blais, Gidengil, & Gschwend, 2017). We are therefore confident in concluding and emphasizing that politics is not only back in EU studies (see also Risse, 2010), but here to stay.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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